



Food Safety & Nutrition

Holiday Meat on Your Table



Sandra Brown

Food Safety and Nutrition Faculty

No doubt about it, holiday time is turkey time. Of the over 275 million turkeys produced, 67 million (or 25 percent) are served at Thanksgiving and Christmas. Yet numerous other meats are also traditional at holiday gatherings. Some families choose a rib roast; others, a ham; and some will have the butcher arrange a crown roast of lamb.

If a hunter's in the clan, that family may serve wild game such as duck, venison or pheasant. Small families may opt for a bird smaller than a turkey -- such as capon, duck, goose or Cornish hen -- or a small cut of meat like a pork tenderloin or veal roast.

Whatever the choice, have a meat thermometer on hand to determine when the meat has reached a safe temperature as well as the preferred doneness. For special holiday meals, the cook wants everything perfect -- and perfectly safe.

When choosing your holiday meat, be assured that all beef, lamb, pork, veal and poultry sold at your supermarket have been inspected for wholesomeness by the USDA or state inspection systems. Once your purchase is at home, refrigerate it immediately and cook or freeze fresh poultry within 1 or 2 days; fresh meats, 3 to 5 days.

There are two types of hams: fully cooked and those that need cooking. Fully cooked hams may be eaten cold or reheated to 140 °F. When storing these hams, observe use-by dates on hams sealed at the plant; use store-wrapped cooked ham portions within 3 to 5 days. "Cook-before-eating" hams must be cooked to 160 °F to destroy harmful bacteria that may be present. Use within 7 days.

Wild game bagged by hunters obviously has not been federally or state inspected so care must be taken to handle it safely. Parasites such as *Trichinella* and *Toxoplasma* may be present. Improper handling can cause bacterial contamination as well as off-flavors.

Dress game in the field right after shooting. Dressed meat must be chilled as soon as possible. Keep the game cold -- below 40° F, until it can be cooked or frozen.

Roasting Holiday Meats

Roasting is the recommended method for cooking tender meats. To roast, meat is placed on a rack in a shallow, uncovered pan and is cooked by the indirect dry heat of an oven. To keep the meat tender and minimize shrinkage due to the evaporation of moisture, a moderately slow oven temperature of 325 °F should be used.

WSU Extension along with USDA does not recommend cooking meat and poultry at oven temperatures lower than 325 °F because these foods could remain in the 'Danger Zone' (temperatures of 40 ° to 140 °F) too long. Bacteria which may be present on these foods will multiply rapidly at these temperatures.

Boned and rolled meats require more cooking time per pound than bone-in cuts because it takes longer for the heat to penetrate through the solid meat.

BEEF:

Beef is leaner these days so roasting cuts from the rib, tenderloin, and eye round to medium rare (145 °F) keeps these roasts tender and juicy. Whereas ground beef should be cooked to 160 °F to be safe, beef roasts are whole muscle meat and any bacteria would most likely be on the surface. For that reason, a beef roast needn't reach 160 °F to be safe.

LAMB:

Technically, "Spring lamb" is meat from lambs slaughtered from March to the first week in October. The term comes from olden times when lambs born in harsh winter weather would have little chance to survive until the next year. Today with more protected animal husbandry conditions, enjoying "lamb" -- meat from sheep about one year old, needn't be confined to a particular season of the year.

Some people may view lamb as a fatty meat. However, leg and loin lamb meat has a similar fat content to lean beef and pork loin when trimmed of visible fat.

PORK:

Because hogs are about 50 percent leaner than they were 25 years ago, today's pork cooks faster and can dry out when overcooked. Years ago when pork had more fat than it does today, the meat could be overcooked and still be fairly tender and flavorful.

Cook fresh pork to 160 °F (medium) or to 170 °F (well done). Fresh pork cooked to medium doneness as measured with a meat thermometer may still be pale pink inside but will be safe. Heating to 160 °F kills foodborne bacteria -- such as Salmonella -- as well as parasites that cause trichinosis and toxoplasmosis.

WILD GAME:

To remove the "gamey" flavor, you can soak wild meat or poultry in a solution of either 1 tablespoon salt or 1 cup vinegar per quart of cold water. Use enough solution to cover the game completely and soak it overnight in the refrigerator. Discard the soaking solution before cooking.

Wild game is leaner than its domestically raised counterpart. But trim any visible fat -- that's where a gamey flavor can reside. Then roast tender cuts of venison and game birds (if skinned) covered with oil-soaked cheesecloth or strips of bacon to prevent the meat from drying out. Set them on a rack in a shallow pan and roast at 325 °F.

DUCK and GOOSE:

Most domestic ducks are the breed called White Peking. The term "Long Island" duck is a trade name. Domestic ducklings have a great deal of fat. While it helps them float when swimming, fat is undesirable in a cooked duck. Therefore, it's recommended to prick or score the skin of a whole duck before cooking so much of the fat will render out.

Although domestic geese are larger than ducks, they are cooked in the same manner. Oven cooking bags are helpful for cooking these birds because they hold the fat for easy disposal and keep the oven spatter-free.

CAPONS and CORNISH HENS:

These specialty birds are chickens. Cornish hens are small broiler-fryers weighing 1 to 2 pounds. Capons are male chickens which are surgically unsexed; weighing about 4 to 7 pounds, they have generous quantities of tender, light meat. Roast them as you would any chicken.
